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SUBJECT: MOROCCO/IRAN: THE PHANTOM SHIA MENACE

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 1C. 08 RABAT 178

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Classified By: Consul General Millard for reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: One of Morocco's top experts on Islam discounted the government of Morocco's (GOM) explanation that the Iranian Shia menace was a proximate cause of the breakdown in relations between the two countries. Whatever Iran's alleged proselytizing activities may have borne, the penetration of Shia Islam in Morocco is still very limited, he maintained. GOM sensitivities may be linked to the Shia community's basing their loyalty to the throne on the quasi-Shia blood links between Morocco's kings and the Prophet Mohammed. Leading Moroccan Shia deny links to Hizbullah or Iran, however. In contrast to the few Shia here, mostly immigrants or their descendants, he thought there might be as many as 20,000 Moroccans in Europe who have converted to Shia Islam. The expert saw the Iranian Shia "menace" as an invention of the GOM and claimed the rupture in relations was more related to Iran's warming relations with Algeria and its perceived shift to support the Polisario's claim on the Western Sahara. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Background: The government of Morocco (GOM) has officially blamed the recent rupture of diplomatic relations with Iran on two factors; Iran's unfair treatment of Morocco following a dispute over Bahrain's sovereignty and Iran's alleged Shia proselytizing activities in Morocco (Ref A). Shortly after the expulsion of the Iranian Ambassador to Rabat, the Ministry of Interior announced the creation of a commission to collect and confiscate Shia publications from bookstores throughout Morocco and the Ministry of Religious Affairs has reportedly ordered Imams to deliver Friday sermons against the dangers of Shia Islam.

Morocco's Imported Shia

13. (C) Mohammed Darif, an expert on Islamic groups in Morocco, described the historical development of Shia Islam to poloff in a March 18th meeting. According to Darif, Shia Islam has existed in Morocco since the early 1960s when it was brought by the Iraqi and Syrian schoolteachers who helped fill the dearth of educational positions in post-independence Morocco (many of them for classical

Arabic). These teachers made their life in Morocco, married local women, and in a limited and informal fashion taught friends and students about their beliefs. There were a very small number of converts and most grouped themselves in northern towns such as Oujda and Tangiers.

¶ 14. (SBU) Darif recalled that the Iranian revolution generated considerable interest among Islamists in Morocco. Abdessalam Yassine, the charismatic leader of the banned Adl wa Ihsan (Justice and Good Works Organization - JCO) dedicated the first five editions of his magazine Al Jamaa (the Group) in 1980 to explaining and expanding upon the ideas expressed in Ayatollah Khomeini's book, the Islamic Government. Yassine, like many others at the time, was fascinated by the strategy of Khomeini in bringing about Islamic governance. Yassine and subsequent Moroccan Islamic groups looked to Iran as a political example to be emulated rather than as a theological or doctrinal inspiration.

¶ 15. (S) Darif specified that in 1983 a group of Islamic militant students formed the group Jundi Allah (the Soldiers of God) which allegedly had ties to Iran. The founders included Mustafa Mouatassim, who later went on to form other Islamic organizations including, Al Ikhtiyar Al Islami (the Islamic Choice) and eventually in 1996 Hizb Al Badil Al Hadari (The Party of Civilizational Alternative). Another young Islamist activist who worked with Mouatassim to found Jundi Allah was Mohammed El Marouani who went on to form Harakat Min Ajil Al Oumma (Movement for the Nation) which applied for political party status around 2007. In February of 2008, the GOM banned the party and the movement following the arrest of Mouatassim and Marouani for

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their alleged involvement in the Belliraj terrorist cell (Ref B). All told some thirty eight people were arrested including Abdelhafid Sriti, a correspondent for Hezbollah's satellite channel, Al Manar. The GOM has accused Moutassim of ties to Hezbollah and, privately to the USG, of knowledge of a link between Belliraj and Iran (Ref C).

Shia in Morocco

¶ 16. (C) While there is an Iranian association with these groups, Darif insisted that the connection is best understood as a convergence of political goals rather than any affinity for Shiism. The main contingent of Shia followers in Morocco belongs to the doctrinal school that follows the Lebanese Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, which he described as largely disinterested in political affairs.

¶ 17. (C) In 2007 the Islamic Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) held a conference in Rabat to promote Sunni-Shia understanding. According to Darif, Mohammed Fadlallah's son Ali attended the conference and later traveled to Tangiers and Oujda to meet with the Moroccan Shia community. In Tangiers he visited the Jamaat Anwar Al Mawaddah (the Luminous (prophet's) Family) association and in Oujda the Jamaat Al Liqaa Al Insani (the Human Meeting) association. Both of these Shia organizations have applied for government recognition from the Ministry of Interior and have been denied an association license.

¶ 18. (C) One of the leaders of this Fadlallah-oriented

northern community is Issam Hamidan, who also was involved in the formation of an Islamist student organization in the early 1990s called Talabaat Al Mithaaq (Students of the Pact.) In May of 2008, Hamidan along with a young editor named Younnes Sifri published a Shia magazine called Ruhyat Muassarat (Contemporary Vision). The magazine, which published just two issues before being closed down by the authorities, spoke for the first time openly about the Shia community in Morocco. It argued that Morocco is in fact a Shia country since was once ruled by the Shia Idrisid Dynasty and celebrates Shia traditions. The publication also affirmed the community's allegiance to the "Shia" Alaouite family of the king which claims descent from the prophet's daughter Fatima and the Caliph Ali.

The Hoja of Morocco

¶9. (C) The Moroccan press has periodically done pieces on the threat of Shiism and most have featured interviews with or portrayals of Driss Hani, the so-called Hoja, or leader of the Shia in Morocco. Hani, born in Meknes, converted to Shiism and traveled to Syria at the age of eighteen where he studied in a hawza (Shia seminary) that followed the teachings of Ayatollah Shirazi. After his eventual return to Morocco, he has unsuccessfully tried to register Shia organizations with the government including al Ghadir in Meknes headed by Hani's brother Mouhssine, Attawasol in Al Hoceim, and Al Inbiaat in Tangiers. In a 2002 interview with a Moroccan daily paper, Hani disavowed any connection between the Shia community in Morocco and Hezbollah or Iran. While Hani has been the face of Shiism in the Moroccan media, Darif claimed that he has only a handful of followers and that the media's focus on him is the result of his own self-promotion.

The True Iranian Threat

¶10. (C) Darif expressed skepticism that Iran is actually involved in, or capable of, undertaking any effective campaign to convert or spread Shia doctrine in Morocco. Considering the effectiveness and vigilance of the Moroccan security services and the largely political nature of Iran's Shia message, it seems unlikely that Iran would have much opportunity to for such activities, he argued.

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¶11. (C) The number of Moroccan Shia is unknown. While there are probably no more than two dozen Moroccan students studying at hawzas in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, the Moroccan expatriate community in Europe, especially Belgium and Germany, is sizable. Darif believes that there are at least twenty thousand Moroccan converts to Shiism residing in Europe. He also noted that King Mohammed VI's speech during Ramadan of 2008 in the city of Tetouan called for the formation of a council of Moroccan religious leaders who would work to ensure that Moroccans resident in Europe are not swayed by radical or heretical ideas. Darif reported that these reforms were aimed at countering Iran's Shia proselytizing activities.

Behind the Curtain: Western Sahara

¶12. (C) Although Morocco perceives a threat from the extended influence of Iran amongst its expatriate population in Europe, it seems unlikely that the breakdown of relations was truly related to Iran's proselytizing. Rather, Darif claimed, Morocco is upset about the warming relationship between Iran, Algeria, and Venezuela and the implications for its claims on the Western Sahara. Darif reported that last month the deputy chief of mission at Iranian Embassy in Algiers (NFI) travelled to the town of Tifariti in Polisario-controlled Western Sahara and gave a speech comparing the berm in Western Sahara to the security wall between Israel and Palestine. Darif believes that Iran has been playing both sides and may be considering changing its position towards the Polisario.

The Phantom Shia Menace

¶13. (C) Shortly after the announcement to end relations with Iran, the press reported that the Ministry of Interior has begun to set up committees in the governorates and provinces to confiscate and ban all Shia publications. Darif claimed that the authorities had already confiscated books in the Habbous neighborhood of Casablanca and had targeted stores in Tangiers. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has likewise directed Imams to deliver sermons at Friday prayers speaking out against the Shia threat. The latest press reports alleged that the police have begun a campaign to arrest individuals suspected of links to Shiism.

¶14. (C) COMMENT: While the real reason behind the break in diplomatic relations remains opaque, we do not believe that the small population of indigenous Shia represents the existential threat portrayed by the GOM. Over the past week the Moroccan press has been beating the drum about the prevalence and seriousness of the Shia threat, portraying the community as an Iranian fifth column. We are unable to confirm the Western Sahara/Algeria link, which the MFA has specifically denied to Embassy Rabat but we remain skeptical that this was the principal reason for a break down in relations. Nevertheless, we share Darif's implied concern that the GOM may be engaged in a dangerous course of action by conflating politics and religion and inciting people against a religious minority.

¶15. This message was coordinated with Embassy Rabat.
MILLARD